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LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/02/2018

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SUBJECT: DIASPORA YOUTH WARY OF MILITARY TRAINING CAMPS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The number of Eritrean diaspora youth volunteering to spend part of their summer in the Sawa military training camp has significantly declined in recent years. Conditions in the military camps remain poor while reports of abuse and death of those conscripted continue to surface. End Summary.

¶2. (C) PolOff met with Reverend Zecharias (strictly protect) of the Mehrete Yesus Evangelical Presbyterian Church on July 1 to discuss updates on political and religious freedom abuses. According to Zecharias, the National Union of Eritrean Youth and Students (NUEYS) has traditionally organized a three-week summer excursion to the Sawa military training camp for diaspora youth. The excursion apparently holds particular appeal for diaspora youth who have grown up in Europe or North America and have never completed national service requirements. However, Zecharias continued, NUEYS has seen a dramatic decrease in recent years in the number of youth signing up for the Sawa excursion. In its 2002 inception, the excursion initially drew approximately 600 youth from across the diaspora. As of 2007, the numbers have dropped to less than an estimated 100 attendees. Zecharias expects the 2008 numbers to be even lower. An Eritrean youth currently in national service previously explained to PolOff that diaspora youth are treated particularly harshly at Sawa and are often beaten more severely than normal conscripts.

¶4. (C) Zecharias also reported the death of a 31-year old military conscript in the Wi'a military training camp, Asmerom Habtemariam. Habtemariam reportedly died from a combination of physical torture and pneumonia.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Despite the overt patriotism of many Eritrean diaspora youth, Post is unsurprised that the enthusiasm for Sawa and other military camps has declined with years of reports of abuse, torture, and death at the camps. Nonetheless, the summer has only begun and flights to Eritrea are reportedly packed with diaspora members readily returning to their homeland, to include would-be military "summer campers." End Comment.

MCMULLEN